

Confidential Advice in the Public Interest: PSAC's Dilemma

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There has been substantial debate about the restoration of "PSAC," a President's Science Advisory Committee that was dismantled by President Nixon in 1972. I agree that his step seriously diminished the quality, breadth and impact of scientific advice to the Presidency in an era when this is most needed. It is important, however, that we explore some political realities that must be recognized and honored if a PSAC is to be effective. Recall that PSAC was a part-time body, one whose loyalty to the Executive was inevitably more tenuous than that of his appointed Science Advisor.

Paramount is the authentic need for a President to have advisors whose discretion and confidence can be trusted, however deeply they may disagree with him on specific issues. He deserves advisors who can bring a range of well-informed critical views to Executive policy-making, especially when new policies are being formulated—and this is eternally in the face of competing national needs and claims from special constituencies. To ensure that all of the relevant options and contingencies are thought about, nothing is more valuable than a candid devil's advocacy, which may be born out of principled dissent with his policies, but should be open-minded and restrained to be able to understand his logic as well.

I do not suggest that the most hostile opponents necessarily be sought on every issue; there will be ample dissent if any broadly constituted, experienced group of independent thinkers is recruited. Such "loyal critics" are unlikely to be recruited as full-time officials—in light of their motives as well as his. He is unlikely to confide in them, however, if they criticize his judgments in public as well as in private counsels. Obviously, they must

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meticulously respect national security classification of data; but that is not the limit of their responsibility to the Executive. Their prestige as members of PSAC will give them advantages in public debate that a President would be loath to enhance for his openly avowed critics. As part-time, confidential advisors, they do not expect to resign if the President decides contrary to their convictions; but if they speak out inappropriately, they imperil the privilege of the Executive's confidence. The other side of the bargain is that PSAC not be exploited to win public support for the President's final policy positions.

The role of a PSAC then goes beyond that of the fulltime Science Advisor, whose position is obviously untenable in the face of a principled policy conflict. The Advisor does play an essential role as manager of the process, which, if done conscientiously, will be an affirmative search for the best informed, necessarily often controversial and disparate views on intricate technical questions.

The President plainly cannot effectively discharge his responsibilities without mobilizing good technical advice on a broad range of policies, in economic, domestic, foreign policy, national security, and a host of other domains. Discreet counsellors can be found as readily among scientists as among domestic and foreign policy advisers. Academic scientists must understand that they may be exposed to special pressures on campus and from the press and the Congress that could undermine their confidential relationship to the President. For many, especially those who are critical of a given Administration's policies, the prospect of being muzzled in public expression of their critical views may place them in a grave dilemma. The terms of the contract need to be spelled out carefully to nurture a new President's confidence and encourage him to call upon academic expertise to help serve the national interest. Regardless of how they may have voted, the expert's role is a depolarizing civility in the process of government between elections.

Despite episodic troubles, these issues were successfully faced up to during many years, during which PSAC thrived. Today, advisory groups analogous to PSAC continue to play a certain role within many government departments, even those pertaining to national security. Nor is the Nixon Presidency acclaimed as a prototype for how the White House should be managed in future. But it is important that scholars also understand and respect their peculiar responsibilities, if they are to lend their special skills to sensitive domains of government.

There is no way that advice of any kind can be forced on a reluctant President. One of our tasks is to revive a *modus operandi* that will show that the national interest is not in irreconcilable conflict with his political imperatives—and that better and more commendable, even more voteworthy, government will be the result.